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# The Antiquarian Photography of Cosmo Innes

On 15 September 1849, the Scottish judge and author Henry Cockburn wrote the following in his journal: 'This day, which was pleased to fair, was given to Pluscarden, nine miles off, and reached by a coach filled inside and out, and two saddle horses. We loitered about the ruin for some hours, and had a turf refection, and a good deal of calotyping, conducted by my friend Cosmo Innes, the Sheriff of the county'.



That afternoon at Pluscarden Priory, in Morayshire a few miles south west of Elgin, was a curious mix of old and new. At the time of the visit the earliest of the monastery buildings had been standing for over six hundred years. However the 'calotype' camera with which Cockburn's friend Innes recorded their images had been invented only a decade ago.

In 1849, therefore, photography was in its infancy. Nevertheless, in Innes's hands it acted as the continuation of an existing tradition of using images to connect with the past. By photographing the crumbling remnants of Pluscarden, this enthusiastic amateur was enabling those who viewed his work to make an imaginative leap into Scotland's yesterday without visiting the site itself. If we examine such pictures we can learn about how this connection was achieved and about the ways in which Scottish history was perceived and indeed contested in the mid-19th century. This in turn can tell us something about the significance of that history to what Innes and his contemporaries believed Scotland's place should be within a Union was in many respects dominated by England.

## Who Was Cosmo Innes?

Henry Cockburn's name may already be known to those interested in 19th-century history as an influential member of Scotland's intelligentsia. However, who was his friend Innes? Born in 1798 to a lairdly family that had fallen on hard times, Innes was educated at Edinburgh High School, Glasgow University, Kings College Aberdeen and Balliol College Oxford. He qualified as a lawyer in 1822, became a crown advocate in 1833 and held the Sherifffdom of Moray between 1840 and 1852. He then took an Edinburgh-based post as a senior legal administrator within Scotland's judicial system and held it until his death in 1874.

However, it is in his work as a champion of Scottish history that Innes's real significance lies. In 1829 he was admitted to the exclusive Bannatyne Club, an antiquarian publishing society which boasted the cream of Edinburgh's literati among its members. These included not only Cockburn but also Sir Walter Scott and the renowned intellectual Francis Jeffrey, plus numerous MPs and aristocrats. A decade later Innes helped to found the Aberdeen-based Spalding Club, which operated along similar lines to the Bannatyne. This later society similarly counted many prominent intellectuals, antiquaries and civic leaders among its ranks and its first president was the Earl of Aberdeen, later Prime Minister. Evidently Innes did not fit the stereotype of the 'dry-as-dust' antiquary, marginalised by the mainstream and ridiculed by his contemporaries. Instead, he operated in the highest circles of Scottish society where his antiquarian activities garnered respect and his opinions on Scotland's history carried weight.

For these societies Innes published numerous weighty collections of medieval and early modern documents that had previously languished in dusty archives across Scotland. It is for these source editions, the result of a lifetime of labour and still much-used by historians today, that he should be chiefly remembered. From 1846 he was also Professor of Constitutional History at Edinburgh and did much to revive the teaching of Scottish history in that university.

Indeed, the lectures that he delivered in this role gave him the impetus to write three books on Scottish history, all of which received critical praise and sold well throughout the later part of the century.

It is consequently surprising that he is so little remembered today. Names like Scott, Jeffrey and Cockburn are part of the well-worn pantheon of the Scottish 19th century. Yet Innes, who was part of the same milieu, is largely forgotten. Nevertheless, those recent historians who have assessed his activities have been fulsome in their praise. According to Dr Bruce Lenman of St Andrews University he was 'an historian of insight and distinction in Scotland's medieval institutions'. In the eyes of Dr Ronald Cant, also of St Andrews, his writings 'remain classics of their time, superseded if at all only in comparatively recent times'. This, then, is perhaps a man whose work on Scotland's history deserves re-appraisal.

As a photographer, Innes's main outlet was the Edinburgh Calotype Club. This informal association was founded in 1841 and was probably the first photographic club in the world. Like the better known Bannatyne and Spalding Clubs, its members included some of Scotland's leading lights. Two albums of photographs taken by club members survive, and among many others these feature 26 calotypes (an early form of photograph) of buildings taken by Innes at seven sites in Scotland and one in northern England. This emphasis on the architecture of his own country gives us a clue as to how this industrious antiquary, influential in his own time but forgotten today, saw Scotland's past.

## **Rehabilitating the Medieval Church**

As his photographs of Pluscarden suggest, one of Innes's key interests was the pre-Reformation Scottish Church. Between 1831 and 1856 he edited no less than seventeen editions of writs, charters and miscellaneous documents relating to that theme, and was one of the 19th century's most prolific editors of Scottish historical sources. This included tomes on the abbeys of Arbroath, Dunfermline, Melrose, Kelso and Holyrood, and the bishoprics of Glasgow, Aberdeen and Brechin. This emphasis on Scotland's Catholic past was particularly notable since the religious establishment and the majority of the country's elite were in that period staunchly Presbyterian. Indeed, Innes was accused by some of being a secret Catholic because of his extensive work with ecclesiastical records dating from before the birth of the Presbyterian Church.

Two of Innes's photographs of Pluscarden, taken during his visit with Henry Cockburn, survive in the Calotype Club albums. Although the priory was founded in 1230, the pictures are of the 15th-century church, covered with ivy and in a state of roofless dilapidation. The images thus expressed a kind of romantic melancholy, contrasting the former glory of the church against its more recent decay. Nature, the pictures told the viewer, was constant whilst the works of man were transitory. This outlook was very much a staple of romantic painting at the time and the works of artists such as John Constable and J. M. W. Turner often featured medieval ruins as subjects. In some respects, therefore, Innes was using photography within an artistic tradition already well-established in paint.



Two of Innes's photographs of Elgin Cathedral can also be found in the pages of the Calotype Club albums. This building dated from the late 13th century but underwent extensive reconstruction in later ages. With that in mind, it is noteworthy that both pictures are of the south door, one of the few features remaining unaltered from the original construction. This is certainly in tune with his stated views

on church architecture. In one book he labelled the 13th century as 'the great age of church building in Scotland'. It is surely no coincidence that he chose to concentrate his photographic efforts on one of the few parts of the cathedral dating from that period.

Nonetheless, Innes admired the building as a whole and referred to it as that 'glorious cathedral, which has survived through fire and violence and long neglect, to recall some memory of the taste and religious feeling of an age called unenlightened'. Elsewhere he commented that 'we find ourselves imitating the modern traveller through Scotland who passes the rectangular Presbyterian parish church to refresh his eyes with the ruined abbey or ivy-clad chapel beside it. Why should this be so?'

In part, the answer is that Innes was an Episcopalian in a fiercely Presbyterian country. Although he was no Catholic, the Episcopal Church was in many ways closer to the Roman religion than to Presbyterianism. Moreover, Episcopalian bishops traced their authority back past the Reformation into the medieval period. In contrast, Presbyterian historians usually rejected the Middle Ages entirely and instead began their accounts of Scottish ecclesiastical history at the Reformation. Since the 18th century this had contributed to a tendency for Scots to find the pre-Reformation religious history of their own country irrelevant, distasteful and even barbarous. One aim of Innes's photographs, as with his source editions, was thus to convince his contemporaries that Scotland's medieval Catholic past had value.

Yet that is only part of the story. Innes's partiality for medieval church architecture was also based on aesthetic judgement; on what the buildings actually looked like. For Innes, the soaring vaults and arched doorways of medieval churches held a charm which the more functional architecture of Presbyterianism could not rival. Indeed, his use of photography as artistic representation rather than objective record is shown by the fact that none of his pictures were accompanied by information about when or where they were taken. This highlighted the aesthetic qualities of the medieval buildings that he photographed against the backdrop of a society that was profoundly suspicious of the whole period.

Imbued with the romantic sentiments that had characterised Sir Walter Scott's novels, Innes believed that history could be not only interesting but also artistically attractive. In the 1700s, most historians had valued former ages only as a means of illustrating a story of progress towards the present. This inevitably meant that they saw previous centuries as inferior to their own. Innes's photographs, however, are just one example of how such attitudes were being fundamentally challenged in the 19th century.

## **Country Mansions and the Texture of the Past**

Clearly there were powerful agendas at work in Innes's photographs of Scottish church architecture. Yet he was also interested in domestic history and in what apparently obscure documents could reveal about how people had lived in days gone by. In this he was, like Scott, keen to illuminate what we might call the texture of past lives. In that vein, he produced five collections of documents taken from the archives of Scottish aristocrats such as the Marquess of Breadalbane, the Earl of Cawdor and the Earl of Morton.

It was probably this area of his antiquarian work that inspired Innes to calotype three Scottish 'castles'. Four of his surviving photographs are of Cawdor Castle, situated in the Highlands east of Inverness. The building consisted of a 15th-century square



tower with a 17th-century mansion built around it. Innes referred approvingly to such composite structures in his written works, which while ‘preserving the rude ancestral tower, surrounded it with graceful ornament’.

This provides a contrast to his views on church architecture. Whilst Innes saw the 1200s as the high point of Scottish church building, for domestic buildings it was the 1600s that were the height of good design. As he himself put it, these 17th-century houses ‘still exist to teach our presumptuous age a lesson of humility’. He also felt that: ‘Scotch 13th and 14th century castles are too much of the nature of fortresses for receiving garrisons, to furnish what we are chiefly seeking, some indications of domestic life’.



This preference can be seen in Innes’s four photographs of Auldbar Castle and three of Gordon Castle. Both consisted of later mansions built around earlier keeps. The photographs of Auldbar in Angus show the original tower, dating from the 16th century, surrounded by later additions from the early 1800s. Meanwhile the pictures of Gordon Castle in Morayshire place the 15th-century tower in the foreground, the additions of the 1500s and 1600s behind, and the 18th-century mansion at the rear going out of shot to left and right. In both cases Innes highlighted

elements of the later architecture that he preferred whilst simultaneously using the older structures to emphasise the antiquity of the buildings as a whole.

These photographs show that Innes did not privilege the age of a building over all other concerns. Instead he judged architecture on the grounds of style. Newer embellishments could actually improve a country house, especially when the original sections were in a 15th-century form for which he had little regard. As we will see below, this attitude is highly revealing of Innes’s views on the architecture of his own time.



In part Innes chose these houses as photographic subjects because he had personal connections with them. Cawdor Castle was the seat of the Earl of Cawdor, a member of the Bannatyne and Spalding Clubs and sponsor of a published collection of documents that Innes found in the Castle’s charter room. Similarly, Gordon Castle was home to the Duke of Gordon, also a member of the Bannatyne Club. It is also no coincidence that both mansions were situated in Morayshire, where Innes was sheriff and where his father’s family originally hailed from. Auldbar Castle, meanwhile, was the home of a country gentleman called Patrick Chalmers with whom Innes had collaborated on two ecclesiastical source editions. In the 1840s the Castle was a centre for artists and antiquaries, and it is likely that Innes spent a significant amount of time there.

However, there is something more going on here. Many of Innes’s calotypes followed the precepts of the ‘picturesque’. This concept had been first mooted in 1782 by an English clergyman called William Gilpin and rested on the belief that particular vistas and panoramas could evoke instinctive responses from the spectator. Quite literally, the viewer knew without thinking that the scene would make an attractive picture. Whilst natural landscapes were central to this notion, Gilpin also saw old buildings as an essential ingredient.

As seen in Innes’s images of Pluscarden, the role of age-worn buildings within the picturesque ideal was to present an artistically attractive balance with nature. This can also be seen at

work in his pictures of Cawdor Castle. These photographs centre on man-made buildings but set them within a natural context, represented at Pluscarden by ivy and at Cawdor by foliage. Moreover, in a discussion of Cawdor Innes explained how the natural surroundings of the Castle accentuated its beauty. 'The right feeling of the present time has forbidden any change that would alter the character of the quaint, antique, charming old place. The simple drawbridge hangs as it has hung for centuries. The place is unspoiled, not changed but for the better. The burn pours its brown sparkling stream down its rocky channel as of yore. The air has the brisk freshness of the Highlands, while the sun shines through a clearer sky than more southern climates can boast.'

This interpretation of the picturesque, as a confluence of historic architecture and encroaching nature, was a consequence of the changes that were occurring in 19th-century Britain. The industrial revolution and the accompanying growth of towns led to a powerful sense of nostalgia for older ways of life. Interest in old buildings in rural settings soared, especially for those like Innes who lived in Britain's expanding cities.

Nevertheless, Innes was by no means a critic of such changes, bemoaning progress and looking back nostalgically to a mythical utopian past. Like his 18th-century predecessors, he saw history very much in terms of progress towards the present. This becomes apparent if we return to his description of Cawdor. 'But the woods now wave over the grey castle with a luxuriance of shade which its old inhabitants never dreamt of. Above all, the country round, of old occupied by a half-starving people, lodged in houses of "faile" disturbed by plundering neighbours, and ever and anon by the curse of civil war, is now cultivated by an active and thriving tenantry, with the comforts which increasing intelligence and wealth require and supply.'

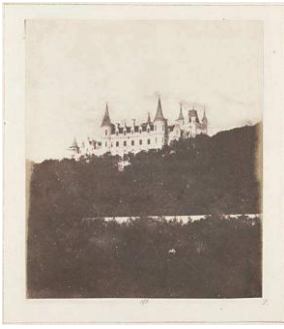
Evidently Innes saw the changes of recent centuries as being beneficial to Scotland and her people. In his opinion, they had enabled the country to move from a violent and poverty-stricken past to a civilised and affluent present. Yet unlike the historians of the previous century Innes also valued the past for its own sake. Like his near-contemporary Sir Walter Scott, he supported progress in rational terms but his heart retained an attachment to the quaint scenes of Scotland's history. It is that emotional attachment, expressed through a romantic sense of the artistic value of old buildings, which can be seen in his photographs.

For Innes and his contemporaries, sites like Pluscarden, Elgin, Cawdor, Auldbar and Gordon offered a sense of stepping back in time to an earlier age. They enabled visitors to imagine what it might have been like to live in days gone by. If cities represented progress and the modern, then historic buildings in picturesque rural settings provided a sense of continuity with ages gone by.

## **The Scottish Architectural Tradition**

Innes's approval for later additions to older structures reveals much about his attitudes towards architecture specifically and his views on Scottish history more broadly. It is highly significant that the final three buildings for which his calotypes survive were constructed in the 19th century. At first this seems incongruous given what we know about Innes's attachment to the edifices of yesteryear, but in fact these images show that he saw the past very much in terms of its relevance to the present.



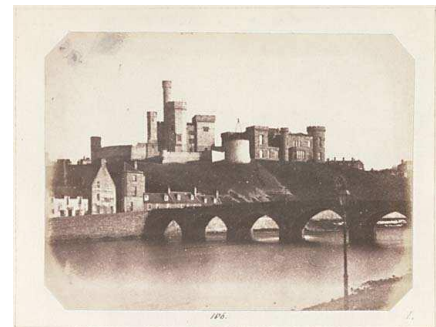


Three of Innes's pictures of Dunrobin Castle can be found within the Calotype Club albums. Whilst the original keep dated from the early 1400s and substantial additions had been made in the 17th century, what the photographs show is the new facade added between 1845 and 1847. This had been constructed in a style known as the Scottish Baronial, which sought to create new buildings in an idealised medieval form. Innes's photographs adeptly capture the pointed turrets and crenulations that were in the period widely seen as symbols of the Middle Ages

As with several of the sites already discussed, Innes had links with Dunrobin. The Castle was the ancestral seat of the Duke of Sutherland, of whom Innes was a personal friend and who had financially support one of his historical works. Moreover, several of Innes's source collections contained documents from the Dunrobin charter room. It is also worth noting that the Dunrobin photographs are framed in the same picturesque way as those of Cawdor and Pluscarden. One image in particular presented the castle high on its hill against a dramatic backdrop of forest and sky.

The architect of this new facade was Charles Barry, a leading advocate of this mock-medieval or 'gothic' style who had also been responsible for the new Palace of Westminster. Despite its medieval trappings, however, the fact remains that this part of Dunrobin Castle was brand new when Innes photographed it. This again suggests that for Innes, despite his status as an historical expert, it was not the age of the building that mattered but rather its design.

Innes's six surviving photographs of Inverness Castle back this up. This building, completed in 1835, was designed by the influential 'gothic' architect William Burn in imitation of a medieval castle. The pictures do an excellent job of catching this likeness and from a distance most observers would indeed assume that the castle had stood for centuries. As usual, Innes's photographs placed the building in its wider setting in line with the conventions of the picturesque. However, the salient point here is that once more he chose as his subject a modern building built in a medieval style. This implies that, in Innes's mind, the 'gothic' architecture of Dunrobin and Inverness could open the door to the past in the same way as the real thing.



The point is reinforced by Innes's two photographs of the Church of St Mary the Less in Durham, a town which in the 11th and 12th centuries had been linked as much with Scotland as England. The church had been rebuilt from scratch in 1847 in what one contemporary called a 'Norman style', so here we can again see design taking precedence over age. However, it is perhaps unwise to read too much into this image. Centred as it is on the people in the foreground as much as the church in the background, it has something of the air of a holiday snap about it.

Nonetheless, Innes's predilection for architecture in a medieval style still seems to have been more about aesthetic impact than historical authenticity. Given that he was one of Scotland's most prominent antiquaries, such an outlook seems curious. In order to understand it, we need to 'zoom out' and consider the wider context of architectural fashion in the 1800s.

Since the 18th century Scotland had been gripped by a vogue for urban buildings which emulated the architecture of classical civilisations. The columns and symmetry of the Royal Scottish Academy in Edinburgh and the Gallery of Modern Art in Glasgow still stand in testament to this trend. Such buildings were powerful ideological symbols, aligning Britain with the assumed democratic values of ancient Greece and later the supposed civilising influence of imperial Rome.

Yet Innes was strongly opposed to this neoclassical architecture and, like many of his contemporaries, saw it as an alien importation that was eclipsing Scotland's own architectural traditions. This concern was linked to a wider anxiety about the tendency for Scots to disregard their own history. In his own words: 'the time must come when the gentlemen of Scotland will take an intelligent interest in the antiquities of their own districts, and scholars will be ashamed to know less of the colonizing and early history Scotland than they do of Greece or Italy'.

This makes Innes's preference for new buildings constructed within what he regarded as a native Scottish tradition more understandable. How could Scots be aware of their own history and use architecture as a means of imaginatively accessing it if the urban skyline was dominated by buildings emphasising the heritage of Greece and Rome rather than their own country? Moreover, this was symptomatic of the sense, discussed above, that cities symbolised change whilst the countryside represented continuity. Just as Innes's source editions and historical works sought to rehabilitate Scottish history in the eyes of his contemporaries, his photographs derived from a similar impulse.

## **Scotland's Place in the Union**

So what does this tell us about how Scottish history was viewed by Scots in the middle of the 19th century? To answer that question we need to briefly consider the audience that Innes's photographs reached. Clearly Henry Cockburn was aware of his work and it is certain that Innes showed many of his photographs to the other members of the Edinburgh Calotype Club. There is also evidence that he gave lectures to informal gatherings of friends and acquaintances about photographic tours he had undertaken, and he also exhibited images in competitions run by the Photographic Society of Scotland during the 1850s. Whilst Innes's calotypes probably lacked the reach of his source collections and books on Scottish history, they were undoubtedly intended for public exposure as much as private pleasure.

It is therefore possible to read his photography as a championing of Scottish architecture and Scottish history to a contemporary audience that tended to reject both. Innes wanted to remind viewers of the aging splendour of Pluscarden Priory and Elgin Cathedral, the antiquity and continuity represented by the castles of Cawdor, Gordon and Aulbar, and the possibilities presented by Inverness and Dunrobin for the revival of a distinctly Scottish set of architectural conventions. Furthermore, the fact that architects such as Barry and Burn were being commissioned to design and construct major new buildings in that Scottish tradition shows that Innes was very far from being a lone voice.

Crucially, however, Innes associated Scottish history with Scotland's place within the Union. This outlook was to a certain extent at odds with the majority view in the period. The Scottish intelligentsia of the 1840s had inherited from previous generations a feeling that it was English history that mattered. After all, had England not always been more advanced than



Scotland both economically and politically? Had those advantages not spread to Scotland only in the decades following the 1707 Act of Union?

Indeed, even Innes accepted much of this argument. He remained absolutely committed to the British state throughout his life and his belief in the economic and constitutional benefits of Union never wavered. In a discussion of the defects that he saw in old Scottish law, for example, he wrote that there was 'not constitutional feeling enough in Scotland to remedy or counteract them til they were swept away by the fortunate union with the freer nation'. For Innes, as for so many of his contemporaries, it was primarily the advances delivered by England's history that had brought Britain to its present happy state.

However, Innes also believed that Scotland had made an important and unique contribution to the United Kingdom. Whilst he was in no sense a political nationalist, he undoubtedly saw Scotland as an equal partner in the Union. Accepting that Scottish history could not claim economic or constitutional progress to rival England, he stated that 'instead of these, we may find something even more valuable, if we are able to trace to our ancient free institutions, and to the burgh life that flowed from them, a sturdy independence and self-reliance, honest frugality, a respect for law and order, and an intelligent love of education, somewhat above our neighbours, which I hope still mark our nation.'

It is this outlook that helps to explain why Innes's surviving photographs were of buildings that either represented or recalled a specifically Scottish past. They were to him symbols of the attributes described in the quotation above, shaped by history and discernable even in his own time. For that reason, he wanted his fellow Scots to gain a greater knowledge of those buildings and the history that they stood for. If English history offered a story of progress then Scotland could provide something just as important: an aesthetically-pleasing taste of the picturesque past that was fast disappearing south of the border. Indeed, these can be seen as two sides of the same coin. The historically romantic locales of rural Scotland supplied a foil against which the benefits of English progress could be more fully appreciated.

This, then, was what motivated Innes to take his camera and his friend Henry Cockburn to Pluscarden Priory on 15 September 1849. That is not to say that such impulses were always conscious, and the visit was certainly intended to be recreational. Nevertheless, Innes's strong belief in the importance of Scottish history and the architecture that symbolised it provided the underlying impetus. To Innes, as to so many antiquaries, painters, photographers and romantic writers of the period, history did indeed have a value beyond merely justifying the triumphs of the present.

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